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The myths of Osiris and Kamberap in cross-cultural comparison

Janet Richards and Stuart Kirsch

In this essay, we compare the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris to the Yonggom myth of Kamberap's sacrifice from New Guinea. We offer this textual experiment in celebration of John Baines and his uniquely interdisciplinary approach to Egyptology, his creative explorations of visual and written culture (Baines 2007), his interest in myth (Baines 1991), and his work at Abydos (Baines 1984; 1991), that ceremonial centre of Osiris through which the authors have the honour of knowing him.

The Osiris myth is an essential background to ancient Egyptian notions of creation, of kingship and society, and of death and afterlife. Yet until the Roman period, the myth never existed as a complete narrative text, and even then its author was a Greek historian (Plutarch) in the second century CE, recounting and explicating the myth to a non-Egyptian audience (Griffiths 1970; 2000; van Dijk 1995: 1697). Although the origins of the myth and the Osiris cult almost certainly predate the unification and foundation of the ancient Egyptian state, the earliest indigenous textual references to Osiris date to several hundred years later at the end of the Old Kingdom in the form of fragmented references to key components of the story in the royally exclusive Pyramid Texts, and as an element of offering inscriptions in the surface chapels and subterranean chambers of elite tombs. Throughout the rest of Dynastic history and even with the development of a national cult centered on Osiris at the site of Abydos, the character of textual references to the myth remained elliptical because of principles of decorum which restricted access to that knowledge (Baines 1990), and the power and danger of the written word in ancient Egyptian society. The fullest indigenous expression of the text known to date is a hymn to Osiris inscribed on the 18th dynasty stela of Amenmose (Rickal 2009; Lichtheim 1976: 81–86); the most detailed text referring to performances of episodes in the myth at Abydene festivals is the 12th dynasty stela of Ikhnofret (Lichtheim 1988: 98–100).

Early anthropological analyses of the Osiris myth relied primarily on Plutarch's compilation and tended to focus on the 'incestuous' marriage between the god Osiris and his sister god and wife Isis (Hubert and Mauss 1964; Frazer 1914; Leach and Aycock 1985). In this essay, we concentrate instead on themes of sacrifice and transformation by comparing the ancient Egyptian

Osiris myth with the Yonggom myth of Kamberap. Like the fragmentary status of the Osiris story, the Kamberap myth also does not exist as a single, continuous narrative. Instead, individuals know different episodes of the myth and only bring them together in their cumulative telling during initiation ceremonies.

In this paper, we employ a mode of analysis derived from working with Melanesian mythology by Stuart Kirsch, who conducts ethnographic research in Papua New Guinea, which we apply to ancient Egyptian texts and material cultural data studied by Janet Richards, an anthropological archaeologist who has directed excavations in the Middle Cemetery at Abydos since 1995. As such, we seek insights into the ancient Egyptian Osiris material from a lateral approach while acknowledging that such a comparison is unusual. Normally one would not compare a Melanesian society that is small in scale, egalitarian in ethos and practice, and known almost exclusively through ethnographic research, to ancient Egyptian society, characterized by its expansive territorial scale and its social and political hierarchy, and known to us through its vast material remains and documentary evidence. Yet despite these manifest differences, there are some intriguing similarities between the two myths we examine here, both of which are central to their respective societies. In particular, social relations and mortality are shared themes. And both myths are associated with complex ritual practices. Of course, there are differences between the myths as well, most notably the importance of the Osiris myths for kingship and succession. We begin by presenting the myth of Kamberap's sacrifice, including Kirsch's interpretation of the myth, and then apply the same method of analysis to the more familiar Osiris myth. Finally, we compare the two myths in the conclusion and briefly consider the value of such comparisons.

Kamberap's sacrifice

The myth of Kamberap's sacrifice is the key narrative of the Yonggom initiation ceremony. The Yonggom people live in the lowland rain forests of southern New Guinea. They are divided by the international border between Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Their primary staple is sago, the starch processed from the pith of the Metroxylon palm tree. They practice swidden horticulture, raising bananas and roots crops.

They hunt, fish, and gather a variety of wild foods from the surrounding forests. They also raise pigs for consumption and exchange. Since the late-1980s, most of the Yonggom villages along the Ok Tedi and Fly Rivers have been heavily impacted by pollution from the Ok Tedi mine (Kirsch 2006; 2007; 2008), and several thousand Yonggom political refugees from the militarized territory of Indonesian West Papua have lived in exile in Papua New Guinea since 1984 (Kirsch 2002; 2006; 2010). Kirsch originally conducted ethnographic research with the Yonggom from 1987 to 1989, and regularly returns to the area. The discussion of the myth of Kamberap presented here is abstracted from his book *Reverse Anthropology* (Kirsch 2006).

The Kamberap myth belongs to a genre of narratives known as *yawat weng*. *Weng* refers to both language and speech, whether ordinary speech (*weng mo*, or 'just talk'), or speech that is taboo or restricted (*weng amop*). As the central text associated with *yawat* initiation ritual, the myth of Kamberap is considered *weng amop*, and as such, can only be shared among men who have participated in the ritual and therefore have the status of *kaget*, or initiated men. *Yawat weng* is episodic in structure, although the episodes are not necessarily told in sequence. This reflects the fragmented distribution of knowledge about *yawat weng*, as most men only know certain episodes of the myth well enough to present them. Kirsch has transcribed and translated multiple versions of the myth, both shorter and much longer than the composite version presented here, which approximates what an initiate might hear for the first time during *yawat* ritual:

Kamberap and his married sister Yumgon went to a small creek to catch fish. Together they built a weir and bailed out the water. They collected a number of fish from the remaining pools of water. Yumgon put the fish in her string bag, and the pair began to walk home. Along the way, Yumgon tripped over a vine. Her skirt opened as she fell. Kamberap saw his sister exposed and had sex with her. Afterward, the pair returned to Yumgon's house, cooked the fish, and shared a meal. Kamberap left after eating.

Later Yumgon went to make sago. During the day she pounded and washed the heart of the palm, separating the edible starch from the pith, and carried it home to cook. At night Kamberap came and stole raw sago from the felled palm tree. He ate the uncooked sago like a wild pig. Yumgon did not know that Kamberap was responsible for the theft; she told her husband Kaim that a wild pig was eating the sago. Kaim built a snare trap and tied a rope from the trap to a corner of their house. He told Yumgon that if a pig was caught in the trip, it would tug on the rope, shaking the house.

That night the house shook violently, waking Yumgon. In the morning, she went to check the trap. To her surprise, instead of finding a pig, she saw her brother Kamberap caught in the trap. 'Don't come any closer,' he

warned her. 'Go tell your husband there is a pig in his trap. Tell him to make an arrow and shoot the pig directly in the heart.' Yumgon returned home and told her husband that a wild pig was caught in the trap. Kaim went to the clearing where Yumgon had been making sago. When he arrived, he saw his brother-in-law caught in the trap, not a pig. But Kamberap told him: 'Shoot me with an arrow to the heart. And when you kill me, you must refer to me as a pig and *not* as a man.' Kaim followed Kamberap's instructions, shooting him in the heart. Even after he was mortally wounded, however, Kamberap continued to give instructions. 'My torso and legs: take them for an *arat* pig feast,' Kamberap told Kaim, who began to carve his body into pieces. 'My head and chest and arms: they are for the men to eat,' Kamberap continued, 'they are for *yawat*.'

Kaim placed Kamberap's lower jaw and tongue in the fork of a nearby tree so that he could address the men assembled in the small clearing. Kamberap sang the verses that explain how to conduct *yawat* ritual. The men followed his instructions. They wrapped the upper half of his body in tree bark after covering him with sago and ferns, and cooked it over a banked fire. At daybreak, they opened the bark and consumed its contents.

The central protagonist of the myth is a man who has an incestuous relationship with his married sister. Leaving the house where his sister lives with her husband, he takes up residence in the forest like an animal. Rather than eat cooked food prepared by his sister, he steals raw sago from her like a wild pig. When caught in the trap, he instructs his brother-in-law to kill him, but only after ensuring that he will be treated as an animal rather than a person. His body is then consumed in the feast that is enacted in *yawat* ritual.

Kamberap's sacrifice solves the problems caused by his incestuous relationship with his sister. Incest violates the principle of alliance; the creation of new social relations through marriage is contingent on its prohibition (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Kamberap's affair with Yumgon also abrogates his exchange relationship with his brother-in-law Kaim, which was established when Kamberap accepted shells and other valuables in return for his sister's marriage and the transfer of her productive and reproductive capacities to her husband's lineage.

In Yonggom myth, a breach in social relations or exchange obligations has dehumanizing consequences for the victim, who ceases being human and assumes animal form. In one myth, a woman must take care of her many nieces and nephews after their parents die. She later tires of the hard work required to feed the children. One morning before going to make sago, she tells the children they should find somewhere else to live. By the time she returns that evening, she has had a change of heart but the children are nowhere to be found. Finally, she looks up and sees the children sitting quietly in the tree branches overhead. One after another, they leap into the air, turn into flying foxes,

and fly off into the distance. Her refusal to treat her nephews and nieces as human results in their transformation into animals.

Among the Yonggom, social relations are mediated through exchange, which provides a measure of the person in terms of what he or she is able to elicit from others. Consequently, the failure to fulfill exchange obligations, whether by design or default, is experienced as a negative assessment by the person who does not receive his or her due. For example, a man who does not receive the expected bridewealth payment after his sister's marriage will regard this as a deliberate slight, especially if it affects his own plans for marriage. Kirsch refers to this predicament as *unrequited reciprocity*. Whereas successful exchange relationships humanize the participants by demonstrating their mutual recognition, the experience of unrequited reciprocity can be dehumanizing. The victims of unrequited reciprocity may become sorcerers capable of harming or killing others. Consequently the problem of unrequited reciprocity is a central concern for the Yonggom. It acquires its significance from the most immutable fact of human existence, mortality. That which makes persons human – social relations through exchange – can also unmake them as persons through unrequited reciprocity and sorcery. Many of their rituals and other practices seek to reduce or eliminate the threat posed by unrequited reciprocity.

In *yawat* myth, Kamberap reverses the expected consequences of unrequited reciprocity in which his brother-in-law would cease being human and either take animal form or become a sorcerer. He does so by leaving his brother-in-law's house and taking up residence in the forest, by refusing to eat cooked sago and stealing raw sago like an animal, and by being caught in a trap that was set to catch a pig. Finally, Kamberap completes the transformation by forcing his brother-in-law to acknowledge his new identity by treating him as an animal rather than a person. By becoming an animal himself rather than imposing this fate on his brother-in-law, Kamberap assumes the responsibility for the problems caused by unrequited reciprocity. His sacrifice repairs the breach in exchange obligations caused by his incestuous relationship with his sister.

Kamberap also suffers the same fate as a sorcerer who is held accountable for his or her actions. Although violence against persons suspected of sorcery was infrequent, it did occur. The body of a suspected sorcerer was butchered, wrapped in tree bark to cook over a banked fire, and consumed like a pig. The threat that the sorcerer poses to the social order is resolved in the same way as Kamberap's violation of his exchange relationship with his brother-in-law: by redefining the offender as non-human and consuming his flesh.

By reversing the destructive consequences of failed exchange, Kamberap's sacrifice overcomes the fundamental problem of unrequited reciprocity. As such, it can be understood as a Melanesian myth of redemption.

The Osiris myth

We know the myth of Osiris primarily through its retelling by Plutarch, although his compilation does not distinguish later additions. The incomplete nature of the Osiris text in funerary contexts may be related to concerns about Osiris' dismemberment and the dispersal of his body parts across Egypt, which would run contrary to the goal of wholeness in the afterlife. This fragmentation is similar to the distributed knowledge of the myth of Kamberap's sacrifice among the Yonggom, which is only told in full when the men assemble for male initiation rituals. The synthesis presented here draws on Griffiths (1970), van Dijk (1995), and the 18th dynasty stela of Amenmose (Lichtheim 1976; Rickal 2009) in collating what is thought to be indigenous content as opposed to later, non-Egyptian additions:

Osiris was the son of the earth god Geb and the goddess of the sky Nut. He was king of Egypt, loved by the gods, renowned for his just and prosperous rule and his fierceness in battle. His sister and wife Isis was his protector, for she was great of magic. But his unruly and aggressive brother Seth was jealous of his rule. He secretly measured Osiris' body and had a beautifully decorated chest made to those measurements. He brought it with him to a banquet; when the gods expressed their admiration, he promised that whoever would lie down in it and show that he fitted it would receive the chest as a gift. Of course, only Osiris fit, and once he was inside, Seth and his fellow plotters slammed down the lid, locked it, and threw it in the Nile on the bank at Nedyet near Abydos. When Isis learned of his murder, she searched endlessly for Osiris, roaming the land lamenting, not resting until she found him. She and her sister Nephthys, the wife of Seth, who accompanied her on the search, took the form of birds.

When they found Osiris they mourned. Then Isis spread her wings over him and created breath with her wings; she rejoiced, and joined with him, rejuvenating his inertness so that she could receive his seed. Through this act, she conceived their son Horus. But Seth managed to find and seize Osiris' body again, and cut it up into numerous parts, which he scattered all over Egypt. Isis went out to search for Osiris a second time and buried each body part where she found it, aided by her sister Nephthys and the god Anubis. Osiris then became king of the Underworld and judge of the dead.

Isis was now pregnant with their son Horus; when he was born, she raised him in a secret place in the marshes of the Delta to protect him from his uncle Seth. When Horus was grown and strong, she brought him before the court of the Ennead in the reception hall of the god Geb so that the gods could give him the throne of his father. They welcomed him, but were divided; some took his side, some the side of his uncle. Horus and his uncle Seth fought



Fig. 1 Winged Isis. Detail from Saite Period coffin of Djehutymose, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology 1989.3.1 (Photograph: Randall Stegmeyer for the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology).

for eighty years. After a series of battles and trickery on both sides, and with the help of his mother's magic and a letter from the Underworld in which Osiris reminded the Ennead how he had created agriculture to feed both the gods and humankind, Horus defeated his uncle and vindicated his father. The council of gods agreed that Horus should receive his father's crown and rank, and humankind was entrusted to him. He made peace with his uncle, who became an assistant to the sun god Re so that he could thunder in the sky and be feared in the battle against chaos. The land was in peace, and *maat* (order) was established.

The Osiris myth is a narrative about access to the afterlife. It begins with Osiris as the king of Egypt and married to his sister Isis. But his brother Seth is jealous of his rule and plots his demise. Seth tricks Osiris into climbing into a coffin-like chest, which is sealed and disposed of in the Nile. Osiris thus begins his journey to the Underworld in a coffin, much like ancient Egyptian humans after death.

Learning of his death, Isis flies throughout Egypt as a bird seeking Osiris. On finding him, she revives him by creating breath (*ḥw*) with her wings (see Fig. 1). She is able to conceive Horus. With the help of Isis, Osiris transcends the gap between the living and the dead by fathering Horus. This is in keeping with the funerary rituals subsequently associated with Osiris as king of the Underworld, the purpose of which is to overcome mortality and provide access to eternal life. To become king of the Underworld, Osiris must first experience death – even though ordinarily a god cannot die.

Seth subsequently finds Osiris again, cuts him into pieces, and casts them into the Nile. But the different body parts of Osiris seem to retain his power. Isis searches for the body parts of Osiris. In one version of this episode, she buries his body parts where they are found, as precursors to regional temples or cults of Osiris throughout the Egyptian Nile Valley. This version provides widespread access to Osiris for worship or offerings, one avenue by which the Egyptians gained access to afterlife and the ability to transcend death as demonstrated in the myth. In an alternative version, Isis binds the pieces of Osiris together again, possibly with the linen cloth that is used to wrap the bodies of the dead during mummification. The binding together of Osiris' body with the help of the god Anubis is also present in various indigenous references to the Osirian story. It is the act of dismemberment that is not explicitly stated in Egyptian texts, perhaps due to the great importance of arriving and being revived in the afterlife intact, which is the *sine qua non* of Egyptian mortuary ritual. Describing Osiris' dismemberment would work against the ultimate goal. Whereas the first version of this episode, in which the body parts are buried, provides access to the afterlife at different locations in the Egyptian landscape, the alternative version demonstrates procedures that must be followed – including the binding up of the mummified body – to gain access to the afterlife. Both variants of the myth help the deceased to reach the afterlife.

As a god, Osiris cannot be killed, but undergoes a symbolic death in order to rule the Underworld and provide Egyptians with access to the afterlife. Osiris becomes king of the Underworld and the chief judge of souls as they enter the afterlife. But his powers are not confined to this realm; he is also associated with rebirth and rejuvenation. Already the creator of agriculture, he becomes identified with the Nile, which renews the fertility of the Egyptian landscape with its annual flooding.

The association of Osiris with fertility is developed in later additions to the myth as reported by Plutarch and others. In one version, Seth cuts Osiris into fourteen parts and throws them into the Nile, where his penis is swallowed by a fish. In this version of the myth, Isis revives Osiris *after* he has been dismembered and reassembled, necessitating the use of a substitute penis she has fashioned. Detachability speaks to the spread of fertility, and is in keeping with the origin myth in which the god Atum's seed was distributed across the landscape.

The sacrifice of Osiris is the means by which the ancient Egyptians transcend death and renew life. For the gods eternal afterlife was always possible, but the events depicted in the myth of Osiris also make afterlife possible for humans, reinforced in two ways: through the places along the Nile where parts of his body were buried, providing access to Osiris through ritual offerings and cult performances; or through the mortuary practices that were central to Egyptian culture. The myth also spells out the nature of the social contract between the king and the rest of the Egyptian population, that the gods could facilitate passage to the afterlife, and consequently those people who had access to the afterlife could become like gods. To ancient Egyptians, the goal was always to become an Osiris.

It is of some significance that Isis and her sister Nephthys took the form of kites, birds associated with death and mourning in ancient Egypt because of their plaintive cry. A person's *ba*, or soul, the mobile element of the individual present both during life and in the afterlife, was also depicted in the form of a human headed bird (Allen 2011: 6). But in the word *ḥw*, used in the passage describing Isis' act of reviving Osiris as she hovers over him in the form of a bird, we have a double sense of the pressure of air as in the wind of the sail, the literal character for the word, but also the wind, alluding to the breath of life (*ḥw n ḥy*), here created by the beating of wings:

Who made a shade with her plumage,
Created breath (*ḥw*) with her wings.
Who jubilated, joined her brother,
Raised the weary one's inertness,
Received the seed, bore the heir ...
(stela of Amenmose, 18th dyn.: trans. Lichtheim 1976: 83)



Fig. 2 Osirian grain mummy, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology 88802. The coffin's lid depicts a falcon-headed deity (Photograph: R. Stegmeyer for the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology).

This makes sense in terms of the magic spells in books of the afterlife that emphasize breath as a key component of the process of restoring bodily functions in the afterlife. Hence birds have a double meaning here, associated with mourning, but also, through the beating of their wings, with the restoration of life through breath.

Meanwhile, Isis raises Horus in the marshes of the Delta. She returns him to the court of the Ennead to reclaim his father's throne. Seth does not give up without a fight, but eventually Horus prevails and humankind is entrusted to his rule. Much has been made of the identity of Horus and Osiris. Some indigenous textual references state that Horus was conceived while the twins Isis and Osiris were still *in utero* (Quack 2004). But the main point here is that the falcon god Horus is both an extension of Osiris and his successor, and like all sons to their fathers, offers another way in which Osiris achieves a measure of immortality. This connection is vividly illustrated by the Osiris grain mummy with a falcon-headed coffin in the collections of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (Fig. 2).

Through the myth of Osiris, access to the afterworld becomes possible. This is the gift of Osiris and

the reason for his great popularity and the longevity of his cults. The myth also provides instruction regarding ancient Egyptian burial practices, from their elaborate coffins to having their bodies bound in linen. The dismemberment and reassembly of Osiris may even be an analogue for mummification. Egyptians have access to the afterlife through their association with Osiris, who died but then transcended death, much like the Nile waters bring fertility back to the desert lands. Dying allowed him to become king of the Underworld, from where he could offer access to the afterlife while still guaranteeing the fertility of the living world. All of this was made possible by his sacrificial death.

Conclusion: myths compared

These are quite different societies, and the myths, too, differ considerably. For instance, in the Yonggom myth incest is the central problem, but in the ancient Egyptian context, the relationship between Osiris and Isis is not problematic; the gods marry their siblings. In both cases, however, the fragments of the myths must be fitted together, and no definitive versions of the texts exist. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983) argued that the variations of a myth shed light on the meaning of the text. However, in both the myths considered here the variants also provide insight into historical transformation. For example, in Plutarch's version of the myth, Osiris' coffin drifts to Byblos, necessitating that Isis' search expand beyond the borders of Egypt, an episode of which there is 'no trace at all in the early myth' (Griffiths 1966: 17). Could this be an embellishment relating to traditions of journeying in Greek literature? Another episode in Plutarch's version that does not appear in the earliest versions of the myth is of the loss of Osiris' penis, swallowed by a fish after Seth tossed the parts of Osiris' body into the Nile; later indigenous texts refer to the retrieval and burial of the penis at Mendes (van Dijk 1995: 1702). This later emphasis on the penis of Osiris dovetails chronologically with the common occurrence in the Ptolemaic-Roman period of phallic amulets (compared to the limited occurrence of this form in the Dynastic period), perhaps following the introduction into Egypt of divinities such as Priapus and Pan (Wilfong 1997: 81, and see 85–6).

Similarly, in the Kamberap myth, the episodes of the myth that follow his sacrifice also make reference to historical developments. For example, in another episode of the *yawat* myth, the bullroarer swung during the original initiation ceremony was spirited away by Euro-Americans to make engines for cars, trucks, boats, and planes. This recent episode of the myth locates the origins of Euro-American technology, and the source of colonial domination over New Guinea, within the *yawat* cult, and therefore as rightfully

belonging to the Yonggom rather than the sole property of Euro-Americans.

Both the Egyptian Osiris myth and the Yonggom myth of Kamberap's sacrifice are accompanied by ritual reenactments. In the case of the Osiris myth, by the early Middle Kingdom, the ceremonial centre of Abydos hosted annual performances of the 'Osiris mysteries', as summarized by Lichtheim (1988: 100; with her translation of the 12th dynasty stela of Ikhnofret referring to these events: 98–99; cf. O'Connor 2009): 1) a 'first procession' entailing combat against the enemies of Osiris; 2) the 'great procession' of Osiris ('the Egyptian accounts of which are so deliberately reticent as to defy all modern attempts to establish what took place', but which involved conveying an image of Osiris to his 'tomb' at the site of the Early Dynastic royal tombs near the cliffs; 3) the renewal of the god's image during a night of 'sleep' or 'vigil', involving also a slaughter of rebels; and 4) the return voyage to the Osiris temple at Abydos of the renewed image witnessed by a rejoicing crowd. These performances took place on an expansive stage provided by different parts of the Abydos landscape and were characterized by varying levels of visual access to components of the rituals (cf. Baines 2006), reinforcing the notion of democratized access to afterlife while ratifying social, political, and religious hierarchies.

In 1989, Kirsch was a participant in the *yawat* ritual that enacts the myth of Kamberap's sacrifice. After being taken into the rain forest, he and other initiates were led through a long gauntlet of otherworldly figures, whose bodies were covered in leaves, bark, and ochre, their limbs entangled. In the background, he could hear the playing of alternating flutes and the sound of a bull-roarer being swung (Fig. 3). As Kirsch walked past the final pair of figures, he stood face to face with a severed pig's head, leaves stuffed into its bloody nostrils, and a man's shell headband tied across its forehead. The man sitting astride the animal's head called out to him: '*Kamberap ye motkono wetme ki*' ('Look, this is Kamberap's mouth!') This was the mythical figure Kamberap, the source of *yawat* ritual. The initiates were then taught the myth of Kamberap's sacrifice, including his instructions for carrying out the ritual. The pig identified as Kamberap was cut up, cooked over the fire, and fed to the initiates, who were told: '*Kamberap ye kat wapdan*' ('You taste Kamberap's skin'). Through this act of consumption, the initiates acknowledged Kamberap's sacrifice by reenacting the original cannibal feast.

Finally, both mythical figures, Osiris and Kamberap, can be emulated by persons. In ancient Egypt, a central goal was ultimately to become an Osiris, thereby achieving a successful afterlife. People of means prepared for this transformation by commissioning elaborate coffins like the one in which Osiris was imprisoned and



Fig. 3 Yonggom man swings a bullroarer associated with initiation ritual, 1986 (Photograph: Stuart Kirsch).

making investments in tombs furnished for the afterlife. At Abydos, the association with Osiris was strengthened by sheer proximity to what was understood as the actual site of his tomb. A review of the Pyramid Texts of the early 6th dynasty reveals that the textual association of episodes in the Osiris myth with specific locations in the low desert landscape at Abydos is especially salient in those of Pepi I: spells invoking Osiris occur twice as frequently as in the preceding and successive reigns of Teti and Merenre, with a stronger emphasis on Abydos typography overall. This textual strategy, effectively outlining a place-anchored biography of the god, coincided with a larger political project relating to the materialization of central government authority, one component of which related to the rise of an Osiris cult at the site. At the same time, elite officials were granted the privilege of burial on the summit of the Middle Cemetery overlooking the wadi leading to the location of Osiris' tomb, even as they inscribed their own biographies in the mortuary environment (Richards 2010). By the 12th dynasty a few centuries later, the population as a whole earned the right to burial in both the Middle and North Cemeteries on either side of the wadi (Richards 2005). In this way persons buried at Abydos could perpetually witness the 'Osiris mysteries', annually strengthening their own regeneration as Osirises in

the afterlife. Josef Wegner has also argued that the 12th dynasty King Senwosret III went 'into retirement' as Osiris in life – building his mortuary complex at South Abydos – so that his son could officially take the throne as Horus during their co-regency (Wegner 1996).

In the Yonggom case, the refugees from West Papua sought to enlist Kirsch's participation in their political struggle by implicating him in another episode of the Kamberap myth. Not long after beginning his research, the refugees asked Kirsch whether he was in fact Katum Kamberap, the son of Kamberap, who was rumoured to have been on the run from the Catholic missionaries. In some of the stories they later told Kirsch about Katum Kamberap, the mythological figure had skin and features that closely resembled his own. The refugees hoped that once again a mythological figure named Kamberap would make the necessary sacrifice to help them overcome their political challenges, in this case the Indonesian occupation of West Papua.

Despite the differences between the Yonggom and the ancient Egyptians, there is much about the myths that is remarkably similar. In both instances, variants of the myths reflect historical developments, ritual reenactments are central to the significance and longevity of the myths, and under certain circumstances the key figures in the myths, Osiris and Kamberap, may be emulated by persons. More importantly, the myths express potential resolutions to the central problems and preoccupations of these two societies. For ancient Egyptians, the myth of Osiris offers a solution to the problem of mortality. By dying himself, and thereby becoming king of the Underworld, Osiris makes it possible for Egyptians to have access to the afterlife. Through his own death, he allows humans to become more like gods in their immortality. His myth also sets the stage for the efflorescence of non-royal and non-elite Egyptian mortuary culture as well as the more elaborate royal and elite manifestations of these concepts. The resulting art and architecture can be said to have given ancient Egyptians a measure of immortality that few societies from any era have achieved (Richards and Wilfong 1995). In response to their central preoccupation with mortality, the Osiris myth replaces the ordinary cycle of the life and death of human beings with a model based on the annual renewal of the Nile valley, which brings eternal life.

The central question is not so different for the Yonggom. Kamberap's sacrifice presents an alternative solution to the problem of unrequited reciprocity, which ordinarily results in the transformation of people into sorcerers who cause illness and death. The myth suggests the possibility that people will no longer turn against one another through sorcery, which is held to be the cause of illness and death. Like the myth of Osiris,

Kamberap's sacrifice implies an escape from the limitations of mortality. The focus on exchange relations also emphasizes the obligations of reciprocity, for which there is an analogue from the Osiris myth. Osiris becomes chief judge in the Underworld, presiding over the trial at which the heart of the deceased is weighed against *maat*. Access to the afterlife depends on one's record of justice. In both the Yonggom and ancient Egyptian contexts, therefore, appropriate conduct is considered central to questions of mortality and immortality.

In this experimental comparison, we have applied a method of analysis drawn from work in Melanesia to an ancient Egyptian myth. This analysis illustrates how bringing a particular interpretive perspective drawn from one mythological tradition can offer new insights into myths from other times and places. This has enabled us to discuss how the knowledge of myth can be partial and fragmentary, and how myths are transformed over time, incorporating historical change. It also reveals interesting patterns in how people grapple with fundamental questions about the human condition. Such comparisons may bring to light aspects of myth and social relations that might otherwise remain obscure.

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